

Riverside Press Enterprise

Poor grades scar region report card

QUALITY OF LIFE: A planning strategy addresses traffic, housing and other concerns.

February 04, 2005

By **JACK KATZANEK and BRAD WEAVER / The Press-Enterprise**

There could be an answer for Southern Californians whose quality of life is marred by snarled traffic, fouled air and overpriced housing.

And it would involve only a smidgeon of the six-county region's land.

The "2 percent" strategy, a plan that calls for more apartments and condominiums in cities, closer jobs and public transportation, and less suburban sprawl, is being embraced by economists, real estate experts and civic leaders.

POOR MARKS: Southern California Association of Governments gives worse grades for several quality-of-life issues in 2004.

	2000	2004	2001	2002	2003
Employment	A-	B+	B	B+	B
Income	C+	C	C	C	C
Housing	C-	C-	D+	D+	D
Mobility	D	D	D	D-	D-
Air Quality	B+	B	B-	C	C
Education	D	D	D	D	D
Safety	B+	B+	B	B	B

SOURCE: SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION OF GOVERNMENTS THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

It would address several of what the Southern California Association of Governments sees as the region's biggest problems listed in its annual report card released Thursday.

The six-county regional planning group's report assigned grades to seven areas: employment, income, housing, transportation, air quality, education and safety.

Two of the categories -- employment and housing -- improved slightly, but the majority posted below-average or near-failing grades.

The 2 Percent Strategy

The 2 percent strategy, which would confine new growth to about 2 percent of Southern California's map, would focus on the cores of cities with definable downtowns.

This would help alleviate congestion and air pollution because homes would be within walking distance of jobs and downtown train stations.

It could also create much needed affordable housing, said William Fulton, an urban planner, whose essay on the plan was included in the report.

Riverside Mayor Ron Loveridge, who chaired the task force that produced the report, said regulatory help from the state is needed to implement a 2 percent plan.

"The state would have to provide some incentives, but it could solve half our housing issues," Loveridge said.

Housing and Costs

Steve Johnson, director of Metro Study of California, a Riverside-based real estate consulting firm, said the concept is sound except Southern California might need a little more than 2 percent because of the huge demand for housing, particularly for homes that cost less than \$300,000.

In December, the median home in Riverside County cost \$371,000, and \$281,000 in San Bernardino County.

"If builders are building attached homes near job and rail centers because we tell them that's what we need, then we have to make that happen through (fees) ," Johnson said by phone.

Fulton wrote prime candidates for the urban infill included affluent coastal cities, northern Orange County, southern Los Angeles County and the San Gabriel Valley.

Inland economist John Husing said there has been interest in multi-unit housing in Rancho Cucamonga and downtown Ontario as well.

"It's moving into vogue, and the development community seems to believe in it," Housing said by phone.

The region's grades were virtually unchanged from a year ago. The region got D's in housing, transportation and education.

Income and air quality got C's. The best performance was in employment and safety, which got B's.

On the Road

The average Inland resident experienced 57 hours of delay each year because of traffic, the fifth highest among the nation's major metropolitan areas.

Despite attempts to promote bus and rail systems, fewer people are taking public transit and more are driving alone, the report said.

The average travel time to work in Southern California, about 28 minutes, has remained almost unchanged during the past three years. Workers in Riverside County continued to have the highest average travel time to work in the region, 31 minutes.

Some commuters say that figure seems low.

"Commuting is a way of life if you want to live here," said Michael Brook, a Temecula resident who said his commute to San Diego is at least one hour. Meanwhile, money to expand and build new roads has been frozen, and the state is poised to raid transportation funds to shore up other areas of its budget.

Last month, Gov. Schwarzenegger revealed a budget proposal that suspends roughly \$1.3 million in future road money to balance the state's finances. That money is attached to Prop. 42, a gasoline sales tax measure that passed by some of its largest margins in the Inland area.

Jobs and Schools

The region had a slight increase in jobs in 2003 but a much better one in 2004, according to preliminary state Employment Development Department reports. More than 70,000 jobs were created in 2004, close to half of them in the Inland Empire.

But the region's workers did not bring home enough money to keep pace with inflation, at least not in 2003. Real earnings, the income adjusted for inflation, declined 1.3 percent from 2002, although earnings power was worse in the rest of the country and other parts of California.

Since 1999, the region's education grade has remained a D. Dropout rates among black and Hispanic students again outpaced those of white and Asian students.

Between 2002 and 2003, the high school dropout rate in Riverside County increased 1 percentage point to about 10 percent. In San Bernardino County, the dropout rate grew 5 percentage points to about 16 percent.

Less than 40 percent of high school students in Southern California completed classes required for University of California or California State University admission.

About half of all Inland adults have never set foot in a college classroom.

Racial and ethnic disparities were also evident in the region. For example, more than 60 percent of Asian graduates in Riverside County completed courses required for college entrance, while only 22 percent of Hispanic students finished those courses.

Air Quality

Between 2002 and 2003, the region's grade for air quality slipped from a C to a C-. The report blamed hot weather for causing the ozone pollution to worsen significantly in the South Coast Air Basin. UCLA professor Arthur Winer said Southern California has experienced a dramatic improvement in air quality over the last 30 years.

But growing population and vehicle emissions could undermine that record.

"It seems likely that only sharply higher fuel costs and the continued trend toward intolerable congestion will bring about a public demand and political will for alternatives," Winer said in the report.

Reach Jack Katzanek at (951) 368-9553 or Brad Weaver at (951) 368-9519.